

Original Article

EXTENT OF CHILD LABOR IN ANCESTRAL OCCUPATION: A REFLECTION FROM WASHER-MEN COMMUNITY IN KARACHI

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ABSTRACT:

Objective: This study was conducted to assess the magnitude of child labor in relevance to occupation and to establish an association with the risk factors.

Methods: It is a cross sectional study carried out in March 2000. Forty children between the ages of 7-15 years were selected randomly in the washer-men community of Goharabad, Karachi.

Results: Seventy percent of the children helped their families in miscellaneous steps of washing irrespective of their age and school status. The occurrence of skin disease was 37.5%, diarrhea 20%, minor ailments 37.5% and miscellaneous diseases account for 5% including malaria and chicken pox. Out of all the children 35% were enrolled in primary and 10% in secondary school. Seventeen percent (n=24) of fathers and 8 % of mothers were literate. The study established a significant association between illiteracy and child neglect (OR=1.27 CI is 1.23, 1.30).

Conclusion: Occupational abuse is more common among children of illiterate parents. Most of the children are engaged in the washing process as a customary obligation and suffer mostly from skin disease and minor seasonal ailments.

KEYWORDS: Child neglect, occupational abuse, skin diseases.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of life of a society is judged by how well it cares for its children. It is a well-known fact that UNICEF has laid down a fifty

years continuing effort on reducing child mortality and improving child growth and development. But it is only a few years ago that the Children needs and their rights were recognized and sparked globally in the "1990 World Summit for Children".¹

International Labor organization reported that 52 million children under the age of 15 years are engaged in labor². Overall child abuse and neglect has increased by 50% between the years 1985 and 1993.

The spectrum of child rights includes civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights. Child abuse exists in many forms, including physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, child neglect and labor. It is astonishing that child neglect alone accounts for 54 percent of the total³.

Overall child abuse is not only the problem of developing countries but developed

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countries like the United States as well and they declared a child protection emergency in 1993. Eighty seven percent of the world's children live in developing countries and out of these the proportion of working children is 30%⁴. South Asian spot light shows that in spite of lingering poverty, the survival prospects of Pakistani children have improved considerably over the past three decades and the immunization rate has almost tripled from 1980 to 1990⁵ because of international integrated efforts on these issues. But very little has so far been done to recognize the rights of these children and protect them from different types of abuses. The problem really becomes complex when there is scarce statistics regarding child labor and specially children working in hazardous conditions.

Child labor has assumed epidemic proportions in Pakistan. Statistics are unreliable but the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan estimated the number of Pakistani working children to be around 11- 12 million⁶. At least half of these children are under the age of ten years. Despite recent series of laws prohibiting child labors and indentured servitude, children make up a quarter of the unskilled work force and can virtually be found in every industry, workshop and on the streets. One World Bank economist maintains that Pakistan's economic viability correlates with the number of children in its factories⁶.

The factors responsible for making child neglect a global emergency are multiple- including exploitation of poverty, lack of access to education and traditional restriction for the girls. It is reported that only 37 percent of children in Pakistan complete their primary school education (or NAPSCH=63%) as compared to a world average of 79% and a South Asian average of 50 percent⁷.

A gloomy picture can be portrayed by the fact that the Child Risk Measure* for Pakistan is 49⁸.

* (A recently recognized indicator & calculated by $CRM = (U5MR + UNDWT + NAPSCH\%) / 3 + Conflict / 4 + HIVAIDS / 4$)

Table I: Important indicators for children

Country	U5MR	NAPSCH*	HIVAIDS	CRM**
Pakistan	137	34 %	1800	49
India	119	21 %	48000	45
Afghanistan	257	76 %	NA	94
Middle East (Saudi Arab)	36	39 %	NA	24
Sub Saharan Africa (Guinea)	201	67 %	67000	61
Turkmenistan	87	20 %	NA	21

* Not attending primary school
 ** Child Risk Measure (CRM)

RATIONALE

This study was designed to identify the extent of child neglect and its related hazards in the occupational settings in order to implement primary preventive measures against child labor.

OBJECTIVES

This particular study was carried out to:

- Assess the magnitude of child labor in relevance to occupation.
- Identify the frequency of different disease patterns among working children between the ages of 7-15 years.
- Identify the association of multiple risk factors for child labor.

METHODOLOGY

Site: The study was conducted in Goharabad, a slum area in F. B. Area Block 15 of Karachi. In this area since last four decades two types of communities are residing, one is low-income labor class and the other one is washer-men class and a canal of dirty water runs in between the two dwellers. Health services are being

rendered to this community by the primary health care center functioning under Karachi Medical and Dental College since 1992. The total population of this area is 10,000 and out of which 5000 are the washer-men.

Sample: A random sample of forty children was selected between the ages of 7 through 15 years in washer-men locality.

Design: This is a cross sectional study, carried out in March 2000.

Statistical Issues: The study tool consisted of a questionnaire, designed in order to collect information on certain demographic and other relevant characteristics. An informed consent was taken and analysis done on SPSS 08.

RESULTS

The study showed that 70% of the children helped their families in miscellaneous steps of washing irrespective of their age and school status as shown in table-II. There was a statistically significant association between illiteracy and child labor ($1.23 < OR < 1.30$). Out of all children 35 percent were enrolled at present in primary while 22.5% have left the school and only ten percent were in secondary school.

There is a marked difference in sex ratio (M/F) for those who are working that is 1:2. Out of sixty percent working for ten hours, majority is of girls. The boys give 2-6 hours to their work, which also includes their relaxation time.

Table II: Risk Factors related to child labor

S. Factors No.	N=40 (%)	CI	P-Value
1. Primary education	16(35)	20.3-50.61	< .04
Left school	09(22.5)	9.99-35.33	<.05
Sec. education	02(10)	1.86-19.65	<.03
2. Father and mothers education n=24	04(16.79) 02(8.33)	31.64-02.82	<.05
3. Working	28(70)	55.33-83.4	<.03
Not working	12(30)	15.81-44.19	<.05
Forced to work n=28	10(35.7)	17.9-53.45	<.04

Twenty percent of the children share in the ironing procedure while others equally take part in different steps of washing like starching, Nile dipping and rinsing or active washing etc.

The disease pattern was found variable according to working status of children. The occurrence of skin disease and of common cold among working children is 37.5 percent each as compared to 10% of seasonal disease and rare skin problems in non-working population.

Table III: Working conditions of children

S. Conditions No.	N=40 %	CI	P-Value
1. Duration of work			
02 hours	08(20)	1.37-19.89	<.04
10 hours	12(30)	15.81-44.1	<.03
06 hours	08(20)	1.37-19.89	<.04
2. Nature of work			
washing	06(15)	3.95-26.6	<.02
starch	04(10)	1- 19	<.04
Nile dipping	03(12.5)	2.26-22.5	<.04
ironing	10(20)	1.37-19.89	<.03
rinsing	05(12.5)	2.26-22.5	<.04
3. Sex			
Working males	09(25)	12.25-33.3	<.02
Working females	19(45)	29.58-60.8	<.03
4. Working Members			
01-04	18(45)	29.58-60.8	<.04
05-08	20(50)	65.49-34.5	<.04
5. Sun exposure			
Yes	21(52.5)	36.9-68.8	<.04
No	07(17.5)	6.5- 28.5	<.03

Table IV: Disease Pattern of working children

Diseases	Frequency N=40	Percentage/ Confidence Intervals
Medical Problems		
Common cold	15	37.5 (22.5,52)
Skin diseases	15	37.5 (22.5,52)
Diarrhoea	08	20(1.37-19.89)
Others	02	05(-.02, 9)

DISCUSSION

The study shows that factors diminishing the prospects for children's well being will certainly effect the prospects for the world. Child abuse is a complex and mystifying problem with many causes and constraints. This study highlighted the menace of child labor mainly due to poverty, lack of education, social obligation and parent's problems. The outcome of these children working in hazardous condition is far beyond calculations and as evidenced in the study they suffer from chronic skin diseases and other seasonal ailments.

There is no evidence of previous work done in such community but there is evidence of distortion of health in studies done on other occupations in relevance to child labor^{9,10,11}. It is taken for granted by the parents that their children will assist them in their ancestral occupation. A considerable proportion of children suffer from skin disease which is significantly related to their working conditions.

All the consequences of child labor can be addressed properly if we can establish a program or special service for its primary and secondary prevention particularly in hazardous occupations. This emphasizes the need for a task force for introduction and enforcement of legislation, particularly in the areas of identification of neglect, reporting, and its subsequent solution. While effective primary prevention requires a fundamental change in the societal values and public priorities in order to manage the problems of poverty, unemployment, parental problems, inadequate housing and certainly the prevention of ill health need to be addressed. Besides this love and respect for the children are the key to humanitarian and political progress. It is also necessary to emphasize on better parenting skills and implementation of effective measures for social and economic stability of the community.

CONCLUSION

Occupational child abuse is more common among children of illiterate parents. Mostly the

girls are engaged in washing and ironing and they perceive it as part of their sharing in household. Only few children are enrolled in primary school and out of those, very few make it to secondary level because of their own lack of interest or due to family pressures. Parents are not able to plan for the future and betterment of their kids and get satisfied with their involvement partially or solely in this ancestral occupation. The health hazards related to washing process and conditions are quite frequent as most of them suffer from some sort of skin disease and minor ailments.

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